

# Six Takes on Photo-Realism



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Cover

Robert Cottingham, *Radios*, 1977

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# Six Takes on Photo-Realism

ROBERT BECHTLE

CHUCK CLOSE

ROBERT COTTINGHAM

RICHARD ESTES

AUDREY FLACK

IDELLE WEBER



Chuck Close

*Lucas II*, 1987



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Textbooks on contemporary art, with their inclination toward unambiguous statements, define Photo-Realism as an art movement that flourished from the mid-1960s to the late seventies and was characterized by the exact translation of a photograph, taken by the artist, into a painting. What is called Photo-Realism today entered the art world under a variety of labels: Super-Realism, Hyper-Realism, Radical Realism, and Sharp-Focus Realism were all used to describe a phenomenon where painted images seemed more real than the photographic references on which they were based.

Whether this approach to art was sufficient to construct a movement is one of the subjects explored by this exhibition. In fact, the six artists represented here—Robert Bechtle, Chuck Close, Robert Cottingham, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, and Idelle Weber—all used the camera for different reasons. Their early works demonstrate that even at the outset of the Photo-Realist movement each one had formulated an individual approach, technique, and goal; their later works reveal the further development of these personal styles over a period of twenty years.

To understand the critical issues surrounding Photo-Realism and the paintings selected for the exhibition, we must examine the role the photographic image has played in the history of art and in our own culture. When nineteenth-century painters such as Cézanne, Corot, Courbet, Degas, and Manet challenged the Academy by depicting subjects from everyday life, they sometimes used the camera to

create studies for their works. But they did not do so openly: influential nineteenth-century art critics, particularly Charles Baudelaire, derided the way the camera was changing how artists viewed their environment.

This attitude remained essentially unchanged until the late 1950s, when the proliferation of advertising imagery that accompanied postwar prosperity in America, along with the ubiquity of television, created an unprecedented role for images in society. The camera reproduced, inflated, and multiplied images. Television generated optical bits of information transmitted by rapid-fire images. Diverse and often contradictory imagery burst forth from billboards and magazines as well. This barrage of visual information forced changes in deeply rooted perceptual orientations. Whereas objects or nature once constituted the primary sources of information, it was now appearance, however accurate or counterfeit, that mattered. Images themselves were information, images were valuable, and images took precedence over reality.

The new status accorded to images led to an acknowledgment of the impact of photographs on earlier artists and to the use of photographs in the creation of new art. The admission of the role played by photography came reluctantly at first. In 1964, Van Deren Coke curated a ground-breaking exhibition “The Painter and the Photograph” at the Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. It was the first organized attempt to make scholars



Chuck Close

*Phil*, 1969

and artists aware of the extent to which photography was used in art. But when he tried to secure photo-derived paintings from art dealers and collectors, he was often denied access because the owners were hesitant to reveal that works in their collections were created from photographic sources.

Two years later, however, "The Photographic Image," an exhibition organized by Lawrence Alloway for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, revealed that artists were relying more openly on the photograph. Some artists in the show, such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, were using appropriated imagery and embedding photographs into their works. But Malcolm Morley, also included in the show, was painting directly from photographic references, a practice that Alloway viewed as second-generation Pop.

The term "Photo-Realist" appeared in the literature of art in 1970, in a catalogue essay written by James K. Monte for his Whitney Museum exhibition "22 Realists." There were two kinds of realism in the exhibition, as Monte saw it, both related to the camera. The work of traditional realists dovetailed with the "wholly-composed view camera aesthetic," while "the snapshot aesthetic permeates the work of the photo-realists. . . ."

In the early 1970s, Louis K. Meisel set forth five, well-publicized criteria for Photo-Realist work: "1) The Photo-Realist uses the camera and photograph to gather information; 2) The Photo-Realist uses a mechanical or semimechanical means to transfer the information to the canvas; 3) The Photo-Realist must have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic; 4) The artist must have exhibited work as a Photo-Realist by 1972 to be considered one of the central Photo-Realists; 5) The artist must have devoted at least five years to the development and exhibition of Photo-Realist work."

Meisel acknowledged five of the artists in this exhibition as Photo-Realists; but he excluded Idelle Weber, who had been taking photographs for her work since 1957. The formulaic character of Meisel's list—or any similar set of definitions—not only obscures what is going on in the works, but also demonstrates the difficulty of classifying artists by their use of photography. Although all six artists here begin the creative process with photographs, each has a variant aesthetic agenda.



Richard Estes

*The Candy Store*, 1969

Richard Estes uses his camera to take photographs of cities for information about light and structure and to clarify space. He prefers to shoot his photographs on brightly lit days and goes out early in the morning, when the streets are empty and the city registers its own nature on the eye of the camera. But the camera records things in and out of focus, a form of visual recording that never satisfied Estes. He therefore takes many photographs from different perspectives to yield a composite of focused details, which he then organizes into a composition and translates onto the canvas with a brush. In this way, he achieves the same focus for every part of his painting—an effect that fascinates viewers and draws them into the work. Estes' paintings are not a reflection of how the eye sees, or how the camera sees, but of how the artist sees.

What Estes saw in the late 1960s were slices of ordinary urban environments—street scenes and storefronts such as *The Candy Store* (1969). Here Estes applied the same exacting precision to the reflective surfaces, architectural elements, and neon lights as he used for the candy bars. But the small

figures across the street—mirrored in the plate-glass window—remain elusive.

The monumental *34th Street Manhattan, Looking East* (1979) is exceptional in Estes' works of this period for its inclusion of numerous and clearly rendered pedestrians. It also reveals the flexibility that appeared in his painting by 1979. "The lighting is pure imagination," he explained. Estes photographed this scene with a 4 x 5 view camera, a large-format camera that has to be set up on a tripod, not with the hand-held 35mm camera he had used for many of his earlier works.

*View of Barcelona* (1988) also enlarged Estes' earlier perspective on the environment. Unlike the storefronts, the scene is hardly a pedestrian point of view. Shot from a lofty vantage above Barcelona, it incorporates a frontal view, deep recessions into space, panoramas, and figures on the same surface. Using subtle brushstrokes, Estes reveals the city in sharp overall focus with its buildings, parks, boulevards, churches, and streets emerging from the sea, sky, and foothills of Spain.

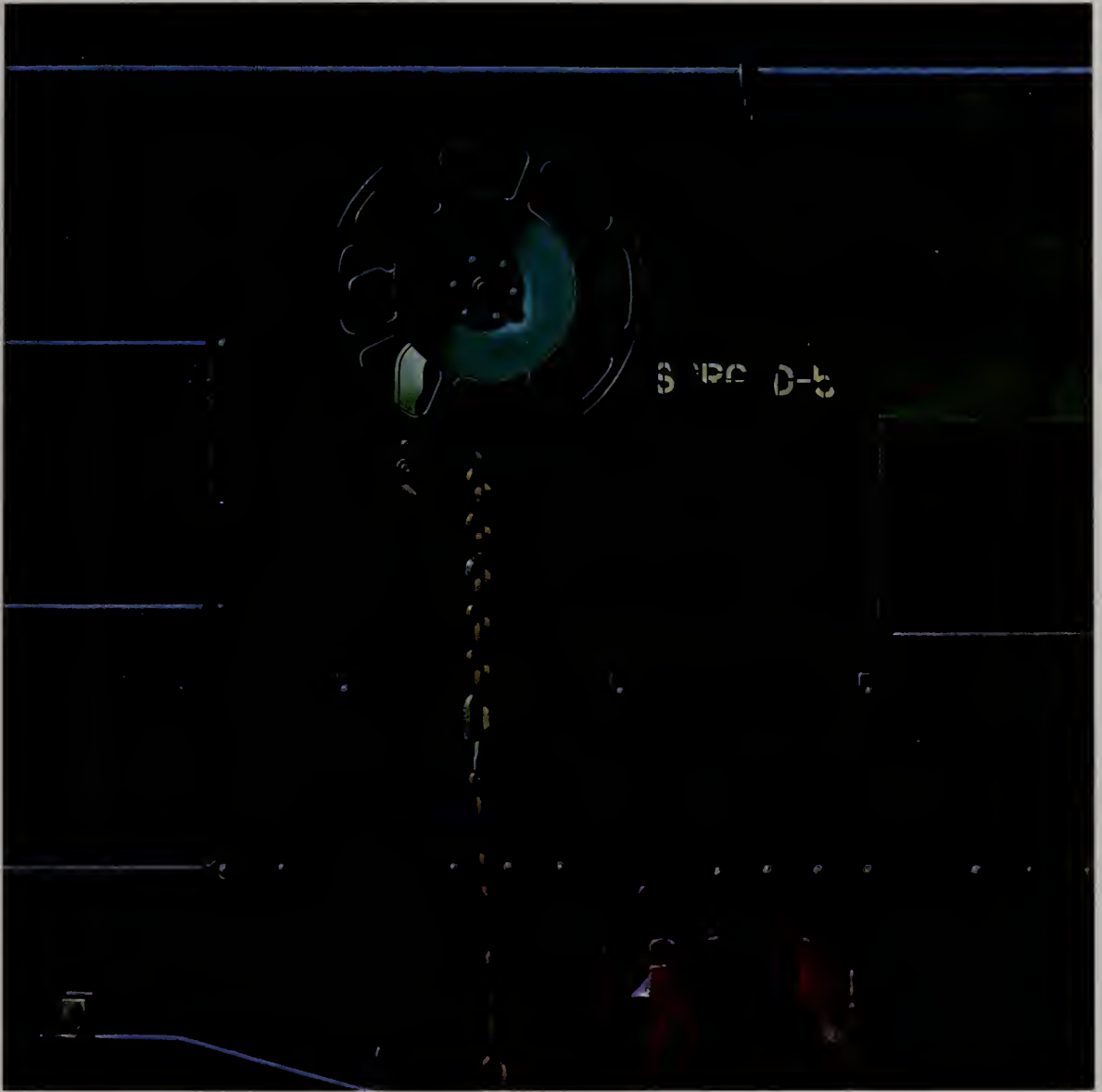




Richard Estes

*View of Barcelona, 1988*





Robert Cottingham

*Rolling Stock Series, No. 9, For Reid, 1989*

Unlike Estes, Chuck Close liked the camera's objectivity, particularly the way it captured different focal ranges. In the early 1970s, he wanted to deal with the two-dimensional image recorded by the black-and-white photograph. When he posed himself before a camera one day and casually snapped a head-shot, he discovered an abstract quality in the range of focuses that he translated into huge, black-and-white paintings by means of a gridded canvas and an airbrush. His systematic approach to the translation of photographic portraits into paintings remained constant. What varied was his amazing array of materials and techniques. Close can go back to a photograph used years earlier and create an entirely new work from it in a different material.

When approaching a Close portrait like *Phil* (1969), which represents the artist's friend, composer Philip Glass, the viewer is confronted with a physiognomic topography that registers more as a map than as a face rendered in traditional, idealized portraiture. Through his grid and airbrush system, Close found that he could avoid virtuoso paint marks and give equal attention to every unit of information transmitted from the photo. He wanted to be objective, to replicate the details and tonal range of the photograph. What interested him was "building the image" and "the distribution of paint on a flat surface and the illusion it makes. . . . I want the viewer to experience the physicality."

*Mark* (1978-79) represents one of Close's subsequent experiments with color, using a technique similar to the photomechanical process. Three colors, red, yellow, and blue, are needed to make a full-color reproduction of an image. Essentially what Close did was airbrush three one-color paintings on top of one another, guided by color separations made at a photo lab from his own transparency. To bring the work to completion on the canvas, he depended on his eye to make adjustments rather than on a mechanical system.

*Lucas II* (1987), with its brilliant color and radiating concentric circles, presents quite a departure from Close's earlier works. Not only has the circle replaced the rectangle as the basis for the grid, but Close here abandoned the airbrush for direct painting with a standard brush. The mark of his hand helps restore the kind of psychological characterization that he purposefully avoided in his previous portraits. He

recently remarked of his sitters: "These are my friends. I think that there is a psychological freight that goes along with any picture of a human being." In *Lucas II*, a portrait of artist Lucas Samaras, Close's method of painting imbues the subject with an intensity that reflects his magnetic personality.

Robert Bechtle turned to photography as a way of capturing the accuracy and detail of real things. By using the photograph as a reference for painting, he could observe more closely how things really looked and avoid allusions to any depictive style. In practical terms, he also used photographs to avoid the inconvenience of having models—whether people or parked cars—in the studio.

Bechtle's subject matter came out of the suburban area he commuted through on his way from Berkeley, where he lived, to his teaching job at San Francisco State University. He chose mundane, familiar subjects in an attempt to get viewers to look hard at the paintings. Many of the paintings Bechtle did until about 1975 are best described as still lifes of automobiles—Chevrolets, Chryslers, Ramblers, T-Birds, and Valiants—which he considered the most important objects in American life at that time, particularly in California. Sometimes, as in the watercolor '59 *Mercury* (1974), the car stands alone; at other times figures appear—'60 *T-Bird* (1967-68) depicts Bechtle's brother in front of his car, located three doors down from their mother's house.

By the mid-seventies, the car had become more incidental in Bechtle's work as he began to concentrate on figures in a setting, such as that of *Berkeley Stucco* (1977). Though the figure is central to the composition, light, surface, and color obviously dominated his interest.

*Broome Street Hoover* (1986) is essentially a self-portrait related to Bechtle's experience of living part-time in Soho in the mid-eighties. While it demonstrates his concern with formal arrangements, it also contains elements that refer to his life and art. The vacuum cleaner is a quotation from his 1965 photo-derived painting, *French Doors I*. Bechtle changed the actual setting of the loft by depicting a framed copy of Winslow Homer's seascape *Breezing Up* on the wall in reference to his experience of summer sailing off the coast of Massachusetts. *Broome Street Hoover*, with its quotations from earlier art and allusions to



Robert Bechtle

*Broome Street Hoover*, 1986

the artist's life, signals a change in Bechtle's approach to painting. Whereas earlier he found his subject matter, he now sets it up like a traditional still-life painting.

Robert Cottingham takes many photographs to capture a single image suitable for painting. But it was never his intention to merely imitate the photograph. He has reiterated on several occasions that his photographs were primarily the "stepping off points to compose the painting."

Cottingham started his first photo-derived painting in New York in 1963 and completed it on the West Coast in 1964. Much of his imagery, such as *American Hi-Fi*, painted in Los Angeles in 1971, came from urban downtown environments, where words and signs resonate from the streets. Cottingham has noted that a lot of his work had to do with "language, words, the American urban experience, with the activity and the communications that go on in downtown areas."

By the mid-seventies Cottingham's paintings of signs were operating on many levels. His use of oblique perspectives projected normally overlooked visual bits of information toward the viewer. Moreover, he had always been interested in older signage,

which he felt was slowly disappearing from the environment. *Radios* (1977) speaks of another, pre-television era. It also signals Cottingham's use of reflective surfaces to create inversions of reality—one sees more of what is reflected in front of the *RADIOS* sign, and is therefore not present, than of what is in the background.

By the early 1980s, a drive toward abstraction, first evident in *American Hi-Fi*, was controlling Cottingham's work. The four-part compositional division of *Ral's* (1983) puts the emphasis on formal structure rather than on the precise rendering of signage. Cottingham shot this facade head-on, abandoning the oblique angles of his earlier photo-derived paintings of signs.

By 1989, Cottingham had stripped his works to essentials, even eliminating signs, as in *Rolling Stock Series, No. 9, For Reid* (1989), based on a photograph of a railroad boxcar. In an attempt to make the physicality of trains, another disappearing American icon, concrete, he began integrating sand into the paint. Drips and splatters of paint were also freely applied to the surface of the works. Rather than locate his works within the verbal imagery of the urban environment, Cottingham now sets them squarely within the dialectics of painting.



Robert Bechtle

'60 *T-Bird*, 1967-68





Audrey Flack

*Wheel of Fortune (Vanitas)*, 1977-78



Audrey Flack

*Islandia, Goddess of the Healing Waters*, 1988

Accessibility and the primary role of the image as communicator were always central to Audrey Flack's depictions. Her first appropriated, photo-derived painting in 1964 was taken from a wire-service photo of the Kennedy motorcade in Dallas. Flack was enthusiastic about the power of objects and cultural icons, the luminism of the slides she used to record them, and the effects of the airbrush as a tool for painting.

*Lady Madonna* (1972) is one of a series of large paintings inspired by a seventeenth-century Spanish wood carving of the Macarena Esperanza, patron saint of Seville, that Flack saw in a church in Seville. It was created by another woman artist, Luisa Roldán. Flack celebrated the Macarena in painting because she wanted to restore the sculpture to the level of high art, but without removing any of the Baroque ornamentation, which she believed added to its cultural meaning.

Accessories also played a major role in Flack's *Wheel of Fortune (Vanitas)* (1977–78), whose overflowing contents were inspired by Maria van Oosterwyck, a seventeenth-century Dutch artist whose painting Flack had encountered in 1976. Traditional Dutch *vanitas* pictures, which warn of the transitory nature of earthly pleasures, were small and created for the private space of the home. Flack, however, inflated her still lifes to 8 x 8 feet, without depicting the flaws in objects that enlargement usually reveals. The power of these *vanitas* paintings, however, came not only from their size, but from the collective understanding of their iconography. Although the meaning of some elements in *Wheel of Fortune* may be highly personal—the framed portrait at upper left is of Flack's daughter—the mirror, candle, calendar, and skull are universal symbols.

In the early 1980s, Flack made a dramatic departure from photo-derived painting to sculpture. At first glance, nothing seems more distant from a two-dimensional photograph than a three-dimensional sculpture. However, *Islandia, Goddess of the Healing Waters* (1988) reiterates the power of the female deity and the cultural icons found in Flack's earlier works. *Islandia* seems the embodiment of the symbolic force felt in *Lady Madonna*. Despite its allusions to mythological precedents, Flack's figure has a twentieth-century beauty that directly appeals to the modern viewer.





Idelle Weber

*East End Bufferin*, 1990

In the early 1970s, Idelle Weber was painting photo-derived pictures of vegetable stands such as *Bluebird* (1972). Her precise depiction revealed common characteristics of the fruits and vegetables displayed, such as their fresh or wilted states. The order Weber found in these displays was as important a revelation of their state of being as disorder was to understanding the transitory nature of her next theme, trash. In her trash paintings of the seventies, such as *Heineken* (1976) and *All City* (1977), she depicted only the recently discarded. An inventory of urban objects is thrown together by accident. One of the things Weber searches for at the refuse sites is some compelling color situation. Frequently, simple color contrasts engage her, as in *All City*, where primary colors potently fill a tight shallow space.

During the 1980s, Weber turned her attention to gardens and grass. In 1990, she returned to the trash theme, completing *East End Bufferin*, about which she observed: "the painting is looser here, the color more inventive in the pebbles, foliage and in the bird." The infusion of energy in the objects resulted from her gestural brushstrokes as well as the physical manipulation of oil paint.

Unlike her earlier trash paintings, Weber discovered this composition not on the city streets but on the rural east end of Long Island. A bird had just died and the beer bottle was freshly trashed. The chance juxtaposition of the organic and the man-made along with graphics greatly appealed to the artist. The elements operate on several levels semiotically. In *East End Bufferin*, Weber places her discards in the same kind of shallow space as in her earlier trash paintings. But the looser handling of the paint emphasizes their volumetric character and empowers the objects to communicate their transitory state of being.

Weber—like Bechtle, Close, Cottingham, Estes, and Flack—tapped into how visual images and information were being transmitted in our media-laden environment. When these artists openly used photographs as references for their works, they introduced an almost universal notion of reality into the mainstream of American art. But the photograph was only a springboard for looking and selecting images for their art. It was a way of seeing.

HELEN FERRULLI



Idelle Weber

*Heineken*, 1976



## Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

### Robert Bechtle (b. 1932)

'60 *T-Bird*, 1967-68  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 98¾  
University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley

'59 *Mercury*, 1974  
Watercolor on paper, 14 x 18¾  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Norman Dubrow 81.28.1

*Berkeley Stucco*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 69  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Gift of the Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation

*Broome Street Hoover*, 1986  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 69  
Collection of the Alpert Family

### Chuck Close (b. 1940)

*Phil*, 1969  
Synthetic polymer on canvas, 108 x 84  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Mrs. Robert M. Benjamin 69.102

*Phil/Fingerprint II*, 1978  
Stamp-pad ink and pencil on paper, 29¾ x 22¼  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Peggy and Richard Danziger 78.55

*Mark*, 1978-79  
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84  
Private collection; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York

*Lucas II*, 1987  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 30  
Private collection; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York

### Robert Cottingham (b. 1935)

*American Hi-Fi*, 1971  
Oil on canvas, 78 x 78  
Syracuse University Art Collection, New York

*Radios*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 78 x 78  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.36

*Ral's*, 1983  
Oil on canvas, 41¾ x 58½  
Collection of Jane Cottingham

*Rolling Stock Series, No. 9, For Reid*, 1989  
Acrylic and sand on canvas, 72 x 72  
Collection of the artist; courtesy Marisa del Re Gallery, New York

### Richard Estes (b. 1932)

*The Candy Store*, 1969  
Oil and synthetic polymer on canvas, 47¾ x 68¾  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 69.21

*Murano Glass*, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36  
The Art Institute of Chicago; Gift of Mary and Leigh Block

*34th Street Manhattan, Looking East*, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 90  
Private collection; courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

*View of Barcelona*, 1988  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 88  
Private collection; courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

### Audrey Flack (b. 1931)

*Lady Madonna*, 1972  
Oil on canvas, 78 x 69  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Martin J. Zimet 72.42

*Wheel of Fortune (Vanitas)*, 1977-78  
Oil over acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96  
Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

*Islandia, Goddess of the Healing Waters*, 1988  
Patinated and gilded bronze, 66½ x 26 x 38  
Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

### Idelle Weber (b. 1932)

*Bluebird*, 1972  
Oil on canvas, 38 x 50  
Collection of Robert V. Kelly; courtesy Anthony Ralph Gallery, New York

*Heineken*, 1976  
Oil on linen, 47½ x 72½  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Adam Aronson

*All City*, 1977  
Oil on canvas, 55½ x 75½  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Gift of the Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation

*East End Bufferin*, 1990  
Oil on canvas, 50¼ x 65  
Collection of Van Weir

*Design*

Elizabeth Finger

*Typesetting*

Michael and Winifred Bixler

*Printing*

Meridian Printing

*Paper*

Champion Kromekote ®

Photographs by Geoffrey Clements (Close, *Phil*; Cottingham, *Radios*; Estes, *The Candy Store*), Bill Jacobson (Close, *Lucas II*), Steve Lopez (Flack, *Islandia*), Ellen Page Wilson (Cottingham, *Rolling Stock Series*; Weber, *Heineken*)

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